

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5543
FRED BROWN/NEW DELHI

FEBRUARY 22, 1978

INDIA-ELECTIONS

ANNCR:

STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS THAT COULD HAVE AN IMPORTANT BEARING ON THE FUTURE SHAPE OF INDIAN POLITICS WILL BE HELD THIS WEEKEND (2/25-26) IN FIVE INDIAN STATES AND ONE CENTRALLY ADMINISTARTED TERRITORY. CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT:

VOICE:

NEARLY SIX THOUSAND CANDIDATES ARE VYING FOR THE ONE THOUSAND TWENTY-TWO ASSEMBLY SEATS AT STAKE. (OPT) THE STATES HOLDING ELECTIONS ARE ANDHRA PRADESH, KARNATAKA, MAHARASHTRA, ASSAM AND MEGHALAYA AND THE UNION TERRITORY OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH. (END OPT) THE MAJOR PARTIES IN THE FIELD ARE THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS, WHICH BEFORE ITS RECENT SPLIT WAS RULING IN ALL FIVE STATES; THE BREAKAWAY INDIRA CONGRESS, HEADED BY FORMER PRIME MINISTER INDIRA GANDHI; AND THE JANATA PARTY, THE NEW PARTY THAT SWEPT TO POWER NATIONALLY IN ELECTIONS LAST MARCH.

(OPT) THE LEADERS OF THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS COME FROM TWO OF THE STATES: PRESIDENT K. BRAMINAND REDDY FROM ANDHRA PRADESH AND PARLIAMENTARY LEADER Y.B. CHAVAN FROM MAHRASHTRA. (END OPT)

ALL OF THE MAJOR PARTIES HAVE A BIG STAKE IN THE ELECTIONS FOR DIFFERENT REASONS: FOR THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS, IT IS A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL IN A FEW LAST STRONGHOLDS AFTER SOME NINETY YEARS OF DOMINANCE OVER INDIAN POLITICS. FOR THE INDIRA CONGRESS, IT COULD BE THE LAST OPPORTUNITY FOR MISSUS GANDHI AND HER DIEHARD SUPPORTERS TO REHABILITATE THEMSELVES FROM THE TARNISHED IMAGE LEFT BY THE NINETEEN MONTHS OF EMERGENCY RULE. SHOULD SHE FAIL TO MAKE A GOOD SHOWING DESPITE HER EXTENSIVE CAMPAIGN

TOURS IN THE REGION, MISSUS GANDHI COULD FIND HERSELF RELEGATED TO THE BACKWATERS OF INDIAN POLITICS. AND FOR THE JANATA PARTY, THE ELECTIONS THIS WEEKEND ARE A TEST OF WHETHER THE PARTY CAN MAKE A DENT IN CONGRESS' POPULARITY IN THE SOUTH OF INDIA.

(OPT) DURING THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS LAST MARCH, THE ELECTORATE IN THE NORTHERN HINDI-SPEAKING STATES BACKED THE JANATA SOLIDLY -- SO MUCH SO THAT THE CONGRESS PARTY DID NOT WIN A SINGLE SEAT IN THE MOST POPULOUS NORTHERN STATE OF UTTAR PRADESH, BIHAR, HARYANA, AND RAJASTHAN. AND IT WON BY A LAND-SLIDE IN THE OTHER NORTHERN STATES. BUT THE PICTURE WAS JUST THE REVERSE IN THE SOUTHERN STATES. IN ANDRA PRADESH, FOR EXAMPLE, ONLY ONE OUT OF FORTY ONE SEATS WENT TO JANATA. THAT ONE SEAT WAS WON BY N. SANJEEVA REDDY, WHO LATER WENT ON TO BECOME PRESIDENT OF INDIA. (END OPT)

THE OTHER NATIONAL PARTIES IN THE FIELD ARE THE PRO-MOSCOW COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY-MARXIST. BECAUSE OF THEIR ITS OPEN SUPPORT OF MISSUS GANDHI DURING THE EMERGENCY, THE PRO-MOSCOW COMMUNISTS FACE AN UPHILL TASK OF WOOING THE ELECTROATE. BUT OBSERVERS BELIEVE THE MARXIST COMMUNISTS, WHO ALREADY HOLD POWER IN TWO INDIAN STATES -- WEST BENGAL AND TRIPURA -- MAY IMPROVE THEIR POSITION SOMEWHAT. THE MARXISTS HAVE INDICATED THEY MAY JOIN IN SHARING POWER WITH JANATA SHOULD COALITIONS EMERGE IN SOME STATES. INDICATIONS ARE THAT NO PARTY WILL GAIN AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IN ANY OF THE STATES...AND THIS COULD LEAD TO CONSIDERABLE POLITICAL HORSETRADING (BARGAINING) AFTER THE ELECTIONS.

GH/RCS